

While the issue of Iraq continues to produce a wide range of views across our nation, I believe that most Americans are united on two fundamental propositions. First, we want our nation – and our coalition partners – to succeed in helping the Iraqis establish a democratic government that respects human rights and abides by the rule of law, and to succeed in helping the Iraqis stand up security forces that can maintain order and protect their citizens.

And second, we continue to pray for the safe return of our brave servicemen and women who are fighting for freedom half a world away. Their professionalism, commitment and sacrifice is as awe-inspiring as it is humbling. We all hope that the reduction of most of our troops in Iraq will be possible in the near future.

After the first of four recent speeches by President Bush on Iraq, I stated that a precipitous withdrawal of American forces from that country could lead to disaster, spawning a civil war, fostering a haven for terrorists, and damaging our nation's security and credibility. I still believe that we can – and we must – achieve success in Iraq. Of course, we have succeeded in the initially stated objective of removing the Hussein regime, and providing a context in which a democratically-elected government could be put in place. Its ability to sustain itself is our last objective.

The national media has tried to use my position as evidence of a Democratic divide on the war. The reality, however, is that there is far more that unites us than divides us on this critical national security issue. Moreover, the different opinions within the Democratic Party on our nation's Iraq strategy are reflected in the Republican Party.

Republican Senators John McCain (AZ), Chuck Hagel (NE) and Richard Lugar (IN) – to name just three – have expressed strong concerns with the Bush Administration's policy, as has Republican Rep. Walter Jones (NC).

For example, Senator Hagel stated in June: "Things aren't getting better. They're getting worse. The White House is completely disconnected from reality. It's like they're just making it up as they go along."

This statement clearly demonstrates how widely felt the frustration is with this Administration's many missteps and miscalculations in Iraq. Among the major mistakes have been the following:

- The Administration justified the 2003 invasion because of the threat posed to the United States by Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction. Yet, no weapons of mass destruction have been found. (My vote to authorize the use of force was based on the failure of the international community to enforce the 17 UN Security Council Resolutions, finding Saddam Hussein to be in violation of the conditions of ceasefire unanimously imposed upon him.)
- The Administration ignored the advice of top military commanders and sent too few troops into Iraq. Consequently, we failed to stabilize Iraq after Hussein was removed from power.
- Then-Prime Minister Ayad Allawi told me in Baghdad in December 2004 that the decision to summarily fire Iraqi police and security forces and oil workers was one of the principal factors causing the instability and violence in Iraq, and the inability to bring oil production to the point where its proceeds could contribute to the reconstruction of Iraq.
- The Administration initiated the war before making alternative plans to shut off escape routes to the north, after Turkey refused our request to deploy troops through that nation.
- The Administration had inadequate plans to quickly get infrastructure repaired and built, and failed to provide electricity and other services. This only fueled the insurgents' ability to prey on the unrest of the populace.
- The Administration failed to properly equip our own troops (failing to provide adequate personal body armor and armor for our Humvee patrol vehicles, leading to higher fatalities and injuries than otherwise would have occurred); underestimated the insurgency; and badly mishandled the widespread mistreatment of detainees in American custody, thus enhancing the recruitment efforts of the insurgents and undermining our international credibility.
- And, of course, it grossly miscalculated the costs of this war. Former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz asserted at the outset that Iraq would pay for its own reconstruction

from its oil revenue. But the United States has now spent more than \$250 billion on this war. And, oil production is lower today than it was before the war.

Nevertheless, despite these many errors and continued attacks on our troops and the Iraqi people, I believe that there are some hopeful signs on the horizon in Iraq.

First, the President has finally begun to acknowledge mistakes, the necessity of recalibrating our strategy, and the importance of listening to constructive critics.

In addition, more than 10 million Iraqis turned out to vote on December 15 in a generally safe, free and inclusive election for a new national parliament.

This election is not an end itself; it must be the beginning of the formation of a democratic government that in the eyes of the Iraqis themselves is regarded as legitimate. Furthermore, it must be inclusive of Sunnis as well as Shiites or it will not succeed. The legitimacy of the political process, in turn, will lend credibility to security forces that defend the people and the state of Iraq.

I believe that we will continue to face great challenges in Iraq for the foreseeable future and we must continually reassess our presence and progress there. Our success there is not foreordained, but it is within our grasp.

We – as a nation – must focus on doing everything within our power to achieve success in Iraq for our own security and credibility. If we do, the year 2006 will be a year of transition for American forces in Iraq, and Iraqis will be able to assume responsibility for their own future.